

# The History of Jamaica

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The history of Jamaica is a rich and vibrant one, which inspires us to move forward as a nation. Our history speaks to experiences of hardships and prosperity; and the growth and determination of a people. Jamaica's history has been poetically composed by Howard Pyle, who states:

Jamaica, like many another of the West Indian Islands, is like a woman with a history. She has had her experiences and has lived her life rapidly. She has enjoyed a fever of prosperity founded upon those incalculable treasures poured into her lap by the old time buccaneer pirates. She has suffered earthquake, famine, pestilence, fire and death: and she has been the home of cruel merciless slavery, hardly second to that practised by the Spaniards themselves. Other countries have taken centuries to grow from their primitive life through the flower and fruit of prosperity into the seed time of picturesque decrepitude. Jamaica has lived through it all in a few years.

– Howard Pyle, "Jamaica New and Old" in Harper's New Monthly Magazine, January 1890

## Original Inhabitants

The original inhabitants of Jamaica are believed to be the Arawaks, also called Tainos. They came from South America 2,500 years ago and named the island Xaymaca, which meant "land of wood and water". The Arawaks were a mild and simple people by nature. Physically, they were light brown in colour, short and well-shaped with coarse, black hair. Their faces were broad and their noses flat.

They grew cassava, sweet potatoes, maize (corn), fruits, vegetables, cotton and tobacco. Tobacco was grown on a large scale as smoking was their most popular pastime.

They built their villages all over the island but most of them settled on the coasts and near rivers as they fished to get food. Fish was also a major part of their diet.

The Arawaks led quiet and peaceful lives until they were destroyed by the Spaniards some years after Christopher Columbus discovered the island in 1494.

## **The Discovery of Jamaica**

On May 5, 1494 Christopher Columbus, the European explorer, who sailed west to get to the East Indies and came upon the region now called the West Indies, landed in Jamaica. This occurred on his second voyage to the West Indies. Columbus had heard about Jamaica, then called Xaymaca, from the Cubans who described it as "the land of blessed gold". Columbus was soon to find out that there was no gold in Jamaica.

On arrival at St Ann's Bay, Columbus found the Arawak Indians inhabiting the island. Initially, Columbus thought these Indians were hostile, as they attacked his men when they tried to land on the island. As he was determined to annex the island in the name of the king and queen of Spain, he was not deterred. Columbus also needed wood and water and a chance to repair his vessels. He sailed down the coast and docked at Discovery Bay. The Arawaks there were also hostile to the Spaniards. Their attitudes changed however, when they were attacked by a dog from one of the Spanish ships and Columbus' cross-bow men. Some of the Arawaks were killed and wounded in this attack. Columbus was then able to land and claim the island.

The Spaniards, when they came, tortured and killed the Arawaks to get their land. They were so overworked and ill-treated that within a short time they had all died. The process was aided by the introduction of European diseases to which the Arawaks had little or no resistance.

The island remained poor under Spanish rule as few Spaniards settled here. Jamaica served mainly as a supply base: food, men, arms and horse were shipped here to help in conquering the American mainland.

Fifteen years later in 1509, after their first visit to the island, the first Spanish colonists came here under the Spanish governor Juan de Esquivel. They first settled in the St. Ann's Bay area. The first town was called New Seville or Sevilla la Nueva.

Towns were little more than settlements. The only town that was developed was Spanish Town, the old capital of Jamaica, then called St. Jago de la Vega. It was the centre of government and trade and had many churches and convents.

The little attention the colony received from Spain soon led to a major reason for internal strife. This contributed to the weakening of the colony in the last years of Spanish occupation. The governors were not getting proper support from home and quarrels with church authorities undermined their control. Frequent attacks by pirates also contributed to the colony's woes.

## **The English Attack**

On May 10, 1655, Admiral William Penn and General Robert Venables led a successful attack on Jamaica. The Spaniards surrendered to the English, freed their slaves and then fled to Cuba. It was this set of freed slaves and their descendants who became known as the Maroons.

The early period of English settlement in Jamaica, drew much attention to the buccaneers based at Port Royal. Buccaneering had begun on the islands of Tortuga and Hispaniola. They were a wild, rough and ruthless set of sea rovers. They took their loot of gold, silver and jewels to Port Royal.

Port Royal prior to this time was an insignificant town in Jamaica. Under the buccaneers' leadership the town, within a decade and a half, grew to become known as one of the "wealthiest and wickedest city in the world".

The greatest buccaneer captain of all was Henry Morgan. He started out as a pirate and later became a privateer. Morgan mercilessly raided Spanish fleet and colonies. He kept the Spaniards busy defending their coasts that they had little time to attack Jamaica. Morgan was knighted by king Charles II of England and was appointed Lieutenant governor of Jamaica in 1673. Morgan died in 1688.

A violent earthquake destroyed Port Royal on June 7, 1692. The survivors of the earthquake who re-settled in Kingston abandoned the Port. Port Royal became an important naval base in the eighteenth century.

## **The Slave Trade**

The English settlers concerned themselves with growing crops that could easily be sold in England. Tobacco, indigo and cocoa soon gave way to sugar which became the main crop for the island.

The sugar industry grew so rapidly that the 57 sugar estates in the island in 1673 grew to nearly 430 by 1739.

Enslaved Africans filled the large labour force required for the industry. The colonists were impressed with the performance and endurance of the Africans, as well as the fact that African labour was cheaper and more promising. They continued to ship Africans to the West Indies to be sold to planters who forced them to work on sugar plantations.

The slave trade became a popular and profitable venture for the colonists. In fact the transportation of slaves became such a regular affair that the journey from Africa to the West Indies became known as the 'Middle Passage'. The voyage was so named because the journey of a British slaver was 3-sided, starting from England with trade

goods, to Africa where these were exchanged for slaves. Afterwards, the journey continued to the West Indies where the slaves were landed and sugar, rum and molasses taken aboard for the final leg of the journey back to England.

The slaves, however, were unhappy with their status, so they rebelled whenever they could. Many of them were successful in running away from the plantations and joining the Maroons in the almost inaccessible mountains.

Several slave rebellions stand out in Jamaica's history for example, the Easter Rebellion of 1760 led by Tacky; and the Christmas Rebellion of 1831 which began on the Kensington Estate in St. James, led by Sam Sharpe. He has since been named a National Hero.

The Maroons also had several wars against the English. In 1739 and 1740 after two major Maroon Wars, treaties were signed with the British. In the treaty of 1740, they were given land and rights as free men. In return they were to stop fighting and help to recapture run-away slaves. This treaty resulted in a rift among the Maroons as they did not all agree that they should return run-away slaves to the plantations.

The frequent slave rebellions in the Caribbean was one factor that led to the abolition of the slave trade and slavery. Other factors included the work of humanitarians who were concerned about the slaves' well-being. Humanitarian groups such as the Quakers publicly protested against slavery and the slave trade. They formed an anti slavery committee which was joined by supporters such as Granville Sharp, James Ramsay, Thomas Clarkson and later on, William Wilberforce.

On January 1, 1808 the Abolition Bill was passed. Trading in African slaves was declared to be "utterly abolished, prohibited and declared to be unlawful". Emancipation and apprenticeship came into effect in 1834 and full freedom was granted in 1838.

The immediate post slavery days were very difficult for the poorer classes. Though most of the English planters had left the islands and new owners were running the plantations, the old oligarchic system still remained. The will of the masses was not deemed important and hence ignored. To add fuel to the already burning flame, the American Civil War resulted in supplies being cut off from the island. A severe drought was also in progress and most crops were ruined.

In October 1865, an uprising in St. Thomas, called the Morant Bay Rebellion, was led by Paul Bogle. Bogle and his men stormed the Morant Bay Courthouse while it was in session. A number of white people was killed including the custos of the parish.

The rebellion was put down by the Governor, Edward John Eyre. More than 430 people were executed or shot, hundreds more flogged and 1,000 dwellings destroyed.

Paul Bogle and George William Gordon, now National Heroes, were hanged. George Gordon was a prominent coloured legislator who was sympathetic to the problems of the poor people and was blamed for the trouble caused by the masses.

Eyre was subsequently recalled to England but not before exchanging the ancient Constitution for the Crown Colony system. The succeeding years saw the island's recovery and development – social, constitutional and economic, and its evolution into a sovereign state.

Education, health, and social services were greatly improved. A proper island-wide savings bank system was organised. Roads, bridges and railways (railways became government owned in 1845) were built and cable communication with Europe established (1859). The island's capital was moved from Spanish Town to Kingston (1872).

The 1930s saw Jamaica heading towards another crisis. The contributing factors were discontent at the slow pace of political advance. For example, the distress caused by a world-wide economic depression, the ruin of the banana industry by the Panama disease, falling sugar prices, growing unemployment aggravated by the curtailment of migration opportunities and a steeply rising population growth rate. In 1938 things came to a head with widespread violence and rioting.

Out of these disturbances came the formation of the first labour unions and the formation of the two major political parties.

These were the Bustamante Industrial Trade Union (BITU) named after the founder, Sir Alexander Bustamante. He was also the founder and leader of the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP), the political party affiliated with the BITU. Norman Manley was the founder of the National Workers' union and the political party the People's National Party (PNP).

Both Sir Alexander Bustamante and Norman Manley were instrumental in Jamaica's move towards self-government. The first general elections under Universal Adult Suffrage was held in December 1944.

In 1958, Jamaica and ten (10) other Caribbean countries formed the Federation of the West Indies. The concept of Caribbean unity was soon abandoned in 1961 when Jamaicans voted against the Federation of the West Indies.

On August 6, 1962, Jamaica was granted its independence from England. Jamaica now has its own constitution which sets out the laws by which the people are governed. The constitution provides for the freedom, equality and justice for all who dwell in the country.

## **The Jamaican Constitution**

The Jamaican Constitution 1962 is the most fundamental legal document in the country, guaranteeing the freedom, rights and privileges of every Jamaican citizen. The Constitution reflects the country's independence as a nation state and, to this day, remains the cornerstone of the island's legal systems and institutions.

The Constitution took effect on August 6, 1962 when Jamaica gained political independence from Britain, after more than 300 years of British colonial rule. While being the first constitution for the politically independent nation, it was not the first legal framework for the island...[Read More](#)

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